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ABSTRACT

To determine the extent to which states are able to assess their provision of services to typically underserved populations, this study interviewed 16 Part H (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) state coordinators. Major findings indicated: (1) six states identified their rural population as most underserved and six identified one or more racial or ethnic minorities as most underserved; (2) states had difficulties with accurate counting of children served; (3) only 10 states collected information on ethnicity or race; (4) data on family income were collected in two states; (5) of the six states identifying rural populations as most underserved, only two included a variable which assesses rural/urban residence in their data systems; and (6) none of the coordinators identified African Americans as the most underserved. It is concluded that states should have data systems which indicate race and/or ethnic background, family income, families's place of residence (zip codes are suggested), and parent employment and insurance coverage. (DB)

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POLICY ALERT

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE DATA SYSTEMS THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIOECONOMIC VARIABLES

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For the past quarter of a century those providing services to children with special needs have been bothered by the suspicion that there are many children and families that are being bypassed by the system. Public policy should address issues such as, WHO is to receive services? WHAT type of services are to be offered? WHO will deliver the services? WHEN? In this "Alert" we address the issue of WHO is to receive services, in terms of the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the client population.

## How Many Families from Traditionally Underserved Groups Are Served?

Service providers will undoubtedly say that all families should receive the services they need and such is the intent of Part H of IDEA. The question is, how does a system know that it has reached all in need of services -- the rural families, the African-Americans, the Latinos, the inner city dwellers, or families with very low income? There is no simple method. But, the first step in trying to answer this difficult question is to keep track of the social and demographic characteristics of concern (place of residence, ethnicity, income) of the client population.

A study of 16 states. To determine if states were in a position to assess the extent to which they serve typically underserved populations, we interviewed a random sample of 16 Part H coordinators (1992, summer). We asked the coordinators to identify the socioeconomic and demographic factors that they include in their data system and in a second interview asked them to identify the population that was most underserved in their state. Data were available on 15 states in the second interview because one coordinator had resigned.

The major findings of the interviews were as follows:

1. Six states identified as most underserved their rural population; 6 identified one or more racial or ethnic minority; 1 identified migrant workers (most of whom are from ethnic

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minorities); 1 identified families with very low income; and 1 coordinator said her state did not have underserved families.

2. An unduplicated count of children served was still difficult for 6 of the 16 states interviewed.
3. Ten of the 16 states collected information on ethnicity or race. However, of the 6 states that identified one or more ethnic minority as underserved, only 3 collected data on ethnicity.
4. Data on family income were collected in two states, but were not collected in the state that identified low income families as most underserved.
5. Of the 6 states that identified rural populations as most underserved, only 2 included a variable that can reliably assess rural/urban residence.
6. None of the coordinators identified African-Americans as most underserved.

The results of our interviews indicate that most states would have difficulty assessing the extent to which they serve the populations that they consider most underserved. We suggest that states appraise the socioeconomic and demographic information in their data system. For example, if a state is concerned about serving its rural or inner city population, the family's zip code can pinpoint place of residence very efficiently. Concern about making services available and accessible to ethnic minorities suggests that the data system should include a race/ethnicity variable. And, concern about reaching families with very low income or families with moderate income who may fall between the crack of public and private insurance suggests that systems include information on insurance coverage and income (in terms of the family size). Finally, because such a large proportion of women are gainfully employed, there is the possibility of underserving the children of working mothers. Therefore, states may consider coding whether or not both parents are employed.

**Is The Number of Families Served Appropriate?**

Once a service system can determine how many families from the various populations of interest are being served, it should determine if the families served represent all those in need. Is any one population being underserved? A service system may not be able to meet absolutely everyone's need, but it must not systematically overlook one population.

Measures such as the rate of low birthweight, or the rate of children in special education at the elementary level may serve as indicators of need of various populations. However, there is no method for determining with exactitude the number of families in the general population or in specific sub-populations who need special services. Therefore, it is difficult to determine if any one population is being underserved.

To assess if specific populations are being overlooked, states can compare the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of their client population to the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of their state population.

If the families served from high risk groups fall below their proportion in the population, something is surely amiss with the service system. If families from high risk groups are proportionally represented, then it is still likely that some families are being overlooked.

From common knowledge as well as from scholarly evidence, it is relatively certain that populations differ substantially in the proportion of families who require services. Therefore, to serve populations equitably, that is, according to their needs, some populations may have to be "over-represented" within the client population.

## Recommendations

Depending on the demographics of each state and the concern of each state as to what population(s) may be underserved, systems should assure the following:

1. Clients should be identifiable by race and/or ethnic background.
2. Family income, at least to 200% of the poverty line, should be noted.
3. Families should be identifiable by place of residence (zip codes are a convenient option).
4. Parent employment and insurance coverage should be noted.

Once the client population can be described in terms of its demographics, then these should be compared to state demographics and to state indicators of need to assess whether or not particular segments of that state's population are being overlooked by the service system. For a discussion and example of how service data may be used to monitor service goals, refer to the report by Arcia and Gallagher (1992).

Implementation of the recommendations presented above cannot provide a definitive answer as to whether or not all families in need are being served. However, it is a pre-requisite for gaining insight on the issue.

## Reference

Arcia, E. & Gallagher, J. (1992) Parity or Equity. Can We Even Tell? University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Carolina Policy Studies Program.

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